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# In search of the ‘we’ of social media activism: Introduction to the Special Issue on Social Media and Protest Identities

## 1. Introduction

An internet meme playing on the theme of the cult movie *V for Vendetta*, and its iconic Guy Fawkes mask, virally shared on Facebook; the hashtag #wearethe99percent used by the Occupy Wall Street movement, criss-crossing with many others such as #yeswecamp invented by the Spanish Indignados; the photos of the “lady in red dress” pepper sprayed in Gezi Park in Istanbul, being turned into a “riot icon”; activists debating on WhatsApp which slogan to use for an upcoming demonstration in the Zocalo square of Mexico City. All these examples point to the importance in social media activism of collective identity, to be understood as the set of operations by means of which social movements define their collective sense of self, who they are and what they stand for (Melucci, 1996). Within contemporary protest movements, social network platforms as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube and many others have not only been used as means of information, organisation and mobilisation, but also as a space to construct and diffuse their collective identities.

How does collective identity operate in social media activism? What are the different social media practices involved in the construction of collective identity? And how do forms of collective identity produced via social media reflect the affordances of these communication technologies and the dilemmas of digital society? Examining these and similar questions, this special issue sets out to explore from a global perspective an aspect that has been surprisingly neglected in contemporary scholarship: the contribution of social media to the construction of collective identity within social movements. While most of the literature in the field has examined the organisational and strategic consequences of social media use for protest purposes, comparatively little research has concerned itself with issues of collective identity, and related cultural and symbolic processes. In order to fill this gap, this special issue tackles the social media and collective identity nexus across the new wave of protest movements that shook the world in the last decade. Contributions encompass multiple social media platforms and practices adopted by activists including protest tweets, the use of profile and memetic pictures, the content management of activist Facebook pages and groups, and the development of internal discussions on WhatsApp and other instant messaging channels. The scope of the special issue is highly global in character encompassing movements from different world regions: the 15M/Indignados in Spain, Occupy Wall Street in the US and the UK, the 2011 Egyptian revolution, the #YoSoy132 movement in Mexico, the Purple People movement in Italy, the hacker groups Anonymous and Lulzsec, and the Gezi movement in Turkey. The articles in this special issue stand to demonstrate how, the process of collective identity and connected activities - such as the creation and circulation of collective names, hashtags, icons, slogans, and similar forms of expressive communication - lied at the core of social media activism. While collective identity

remains a controversial concept in need of further clarification, it is clear that it designates a research agenda that needs to be urgently pursued if we are to fully understand the dynamics of contemporary protest movements.

## **2. Beyond the neglect of collective identity in the analysis of activism 2.0**

The driving inspiration for this special issue is the perception that collective identity, what has for long constituted one of the most relevant issues in the analysis of social movements has been marginalised in the growing body of scholarship investigating the nexus between social media and social movements (Castells, 2012; Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, 2013, 2014; Gerbaudo, 2012, 2014; Matttoni & Treré, 2014; Wilson and Tufekci, 2011). We contend that the disregard of collective identity and connected communicative processes constitutes a major obstacle in the understanding of contemporary protest movements, since it obscures the symbolic and cultural aspect inherent in social media activism and in protest communications more generally.

Three main related reasons can be identified for the current neglect of collective identity: a theoretical, an empirical and a methodological one. First, the strategic tradition of analysis of social movements, as developed by the North American school (Tarrow, 1998; Tilly, 1978) has come to dominate analysis of the use of social media in protest, focusing on the material affordances and organisational structures while marginalising cultural processes and questions of identity. Second, dominant interpretations in the field, privileging the role of personal networks over groups and organisations - such as Manuel Castells' discussion of "networked movements" and the theory of "connective action", formulated by Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012, 2013) have operated on the assumption that collective identity did not constitute anymore a central and/or necessary factor of protest mobilisation. Third, from a methodological standpoint, the focus on quantitative "big data" analysis has gone at the expenses not just of qualitative methods, but also of the understanding of the cultural, social and political contexts where protest develops.

The dominance of strategic approaches to the study of social media activism is apparent by reviewing the literature in the field. The bulk of studies on this issue adopts an instrumental view, interested above all in how social media reshape organisational structures, communication flows and the diffusion of frames and repertoires of action (McCaughy and Ayers 2003; Earl and Kimport 2011), how they facilitate transnational coordination (Aunio and Staggenborg 2011), and the extent to which they are able to bypass traditional media (Tufekci and Wilson 2011). In this context, social media are merely seen as "tools" or channels carrying certain messages, as it is typical of what James W. Carey criticised as the "transmission view of communication" (1989), an approach neglecting the ritual and symbolic nature of communicative processes. Close to no attention, within this stream of research, is paid to the actual content conveyed through such "channels", the discourses, iconographies, and imaginaries social movements forge on social media.

Besides the dominance of strategic analysis, collective identity has also fallen prey of dominant empirical claims in explorations of digital politics and movements. A number of authors, such as Mario Diani (2005), Manuel Castells (2012), as well as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004) have operated on the assumption that because of technological evolution, the role of collective identity as source of aggregation had been substituted by network structures. This line of thinking has found its most explicit systematisation in the theory of “connective action” by Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg (2012, 2013). This theory asserts that collective action is being progressively overtaken by the more flexible logic of connective action, whereby individuals are brought together through personalised forms of engagement. While with the logic of collective action involved notions of collectivity, and collective this new logic “does not require strong organizational control or the symbolic construction of a united ‘we’” (2012: 748) The Occupy and Indignados movements are according to the authors among the clearest manifestations of this logic which involves “far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing” (2012: 750).

While this theory makes an important contribution, we contend that its diagnosis of increasing irrelevance of collective identity is problematic. Bennett and Segerberg provide a convincing explanation of how the field of contention has evolved, also thanks to the affordances of digital media technologies. Furthermore, their argument, about the loss importance of formal mass organisations and the combined rise of individualised forms of engagement is persuasive, and has been supported by a wealth of recent research (Loader & Mercea, 2012). The problem is that in its emphasis on the novelty of contemporary protest, Bennett and Segerberg, as other authors operating within the paradigm of networked protest, neglect the fact that collective identity still constitutes a fundamental process within protest movements and politics more generally. First, debates about collective identity in social movements emerged precisely to capture the so-called “new social movements” of the 1970s and 1980s that developed by and large in opposition to the formal mass membership structures of the industrial era and the labour movement (Offe, 1985, Melucci, 1996). In this context, the notion of collective identity provided, among other things, an explanation for the coherence of collective actors otherwise deprived of the strong strategic coordination, encountered in mass membership organisations. Therefore it is rather surprising that the decline of collective identity is related to the decline of formal mass-membership organisations. If anything, arguably, in the context of informal protest politics, collective identity should be even more important as a form of bonding. Second, opposing networks to collective identity, is problematic, as argued by Charles Tilly with his classic notion of cat-net (a network within a category) (1978: 63) which posits that two factors are decisive in mobilising protest participants: the presence of network ties, and the presence of a sense of belonging to a certain category of people (such as workers, women, students) etc. While Tilly does not use the language of identity to develop the concept, it is obvious that the notion of category involves issues of collective identity.

The third reason for the disregard of collective identity is methodological. It stems from the dominance of quantitative “big data” analysis methods—that rely on large datasets of protest tweets and/or Facebook messages to develop statistical models of protest communication. Big Data analysis has become a scholarly “fashion” among researchers looking at the wave of recent protest movements: on the Occupy movement (Bennett, Segerberg & Walker, 2014; Conover, Davis et al., 2013; Thorson et al. 2013; Gaby & Caren, 2012), on the Arab Spring (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012; Starbird & Palen, 2012), the Brazilian vinegar protests (Bastos et al., 2014), the 15M/Indignados Spanish movement (Toret et al., 2012), and the Aganaktismenoi in Greece (Theocharis et al., 2014). This stream of development of digital methods (Rogers, 2013) has considerable merits, including providing complex overviews of the structures of communication of various campaigns. However, more recently scholars have also become aware of the problems with this methodology, including the way in which big data analysis obscures questions of human agency (boyd and Crawford, 2012; Couldry, 2014); the limited attention for the cultural and political contexts of protest communications, and the disregard to ethical issues involved in this type of research (Chesters, 2012). Furthermore, there is an illusion intrinsic in the God’s eye view provided by Big Data analysis, which comes close to what Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci (1995) named the “myopia of the visible”, that is the tendency of quantitative studies to result in static overviews of protest activity (action as fact) and thus neglect the micro-dynamics of collective action (action as process). Finally, there is an ethical problem because this kind of research alters the relationships between researchers and activists, since—physical engagement with activist communities is no longer required (Croeser & Highfield, 2014). To cope with these limitations, and develop ways to recuperate collective identity as an object of research, it is urgent to develop mixed approaches (see for instance Costanza-Chock, 2012; Croeser & Highfield, 2014) that can combine the power of big data analysis with a qualitative understanding of symbolic processes and cultural issues.

This special issue provides with valuable insights to overcome these theoretical, empirical and methodological flaws by reasserting the relevance of collective identity in contemporary protest movements. By shifting the focus from the structure of communication, to the symbolic processes taking place on social media, and from the nature of technological affordances to the analysis of the content conveyed through these online platforms, this special issue examines the nature and dynamics of collective identity processes in a digital age. It illuminates the different transformations in the process of collective identity brought by the use of social media, including shifts in the content of protest identity; in the relationship between personal and collective forms of identification; and in its forms of circulation. Finally, it highlights how the notion of collective identity remains controversial and in need of further conceptual and methodological assessment.

### **3. The new shape of protest identity at the time of Facebook and Twitter**

In her article, **Stefania Milan** offers a revisitation and a reconfiguration of the notion of collective identity and the processes of its creation in the digital age as an exercise of



individuality, performance, visibility, and juxtaposition. In her exploration of the consequences of the introduction of social media and cloud computing on collective action, she shows that social media have been modifying the very *materiality* of the process of collective identity leading to what she terms ‘cloud protesting’. In this context, she points out, “the material of social media has become the vehicle of meaning work, adjoining and to some extent replacing other traditional intermediaries such as alternative and mainstream media and face-to-face interactions”. Milan contends that in this new scenario a politics of identity becomes unavoidably imbricated with a politics of visibility, which depends on the availability of datafied images, terms, and concepts, within the activist cloud.

Based on interviews with activists in New York, London and other cities, **Anastasia Kavada** argues that the concept of collective identity can still be useful in the study of “how collectives constitute themselves as actors”. Combining Melucci’s reflections with insights from organizational communication, she explores how social media were appropriated in the construction of the “collective” within the Occupy movement, arguing that Facebook and Twitter were used as part of the process of “identization” of the movement. According to Kavada, these online platforms “tended to blur the boundaries between the inside the outside of the movement in a way that suited its values of inclusiveness and direct participation”. But their use also led to negotiations and conflicts “around Occupy’s collective voice as constructed on these platforms”. This was also due to the reluctance of the movement to clearly identify its boundaries and thus better define the nature of its collective voice, beyond all-encompassing collective definitions as the 99%.

**Emiliano Treré** urges us to shift the focus of traditional research - overly centered on performative and external forms of communication - and look instead at internal processes of what he, based on Goffman’s classic theorisation, calls “backstage activism”. Within channels as WhatsApp and on social media platforms’ private messaging systems (as Facebook’s inbox), more private communications took place among activists and became a key site for the forging and nurturing of a collective identity. Based on an extensive ethnography with the Mexican #YoSoy132 networked movement, Treré argues that these channels constitute “safe and more relaxed places” in which core organisers can begin to flesh out the collective meaning of a movement, before this is eventually channeled on ‘public’ social media spaces. This process challenges instrumental conceptions of social media, and demonstrates how these platforms are not just ‘channels’, but also represent *themselves* a source of collective identities.

**Paolo Gerbaudo**’s article analyses the use of collective protest avatars across the social movements of 2011, including the picture of Egyptian martyr Khaled Said, or the mask of Guy Fawkes, as means of a ritual of “digital identity fusion”, through which individual internet users immerse themselves symbolically in a powerful but elusive online crowd. Gerbaudo argues that “practices of collective digital identification taking place on activist social media go against the grain of the vision of our neoliberal society as irremediably individualistic” and point to the “radical political possibilities intrinsic in social media” and “the emerging desire for collectivity that arises” within them. Yet, he also highlights the fickleness of these forms of digital solidarity,

due to the fact that as easily as users can switch their profile picture to a protest avatar, they can abandon it.

**Postill, Monterde, Calleja and Aguilera** analyse that the 15M/Indignados movement and their use of social media. Extending Melucci's definition of collective identity in order to encompass complex social media dynamics, the authors argue for seeing the creation of identity in social media "through a multiplicity of levels of description of the system's interactions", at the intersection between the individual and the collective and not reducible to any of the two levels, but located at the level of networking processes. They argue that social media activism in Spain has resulted in a "multitudinous identity" that is a form of collective identity which resembles the nature of the multitude, the protean social subject theorised by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2004). This kind of identity is "characterized by a deep social transversality and heterogeneity, as well as a transient and distributed leadership composition driven by action initiatives".

**Coretti's** paper explores the impact of social media on the construction of collective identity within the anti-Berlusconi Popolo Viola (Purple People) movement in Italy. Coretti highlights that collective identity is built in the dialectic relations between changing human interactions and social media's evolving infrastructure. He demonstrates that within this movement, social media platforms as Facebook came to constitute a key terrain for both the construction and the contestation of collective identity. Coretti argues that "after an initial success, the incompatibility between the commercial interests behind Facebook's design, and the egalitarian ideology of Popolo Viola became manifest". Thus his contribution underlines the imbrication of technological affordances and power dynamics in the construction of collective identity through social media platforms.

Examining recent hacking and digital activism practices, ranging from Anonymous, and Lulzsec, to Occupy Wall Street, **Kevin McDonald** provides a critical counterpoint to the core argument of this special issue. He demonstrates the problematic status of collective identity as a notion by means of which to capture the action and culture of contemporary movements. This is most evident in the case of Anonymous, which according to McDonald is characterised by a rejection of identity, and an embrace of anonymity. The sociologist sees this attitude as a response to the culture of radical transparency and the real identity protocol which characterises Facebook, as well as the culture of the "quantified self". Instead of the development of a traditional collective identity, the author contend that we are witnessing a "series of practices framed in terms of masking, the ephemeral, contingency, creativity, temporality, and a refusal of fixed identity".

Taking a similar line to McDonald, and drawing inspiration from his longstanding work on social movements, **Balca Arda** studies the social media conversations of the Occupy Gezi movement in Turkey and the Internet memes and viral images circulated through them. She approaches social media as a space for the construction of solidarity, but similarly to McDonald she questions whether what is stake is the notion of collective identity. She argues that the movement did not have a unified collective identity, but that it was rather characterised by a

multiplicity of identities, taking the form of what McDonald calls “fluidarity”, as opposed to the traditional notion of solidarity with its emphasis on unity and stability (2006). She argues that the construction of such flexible fluidarity, as well as the adoption of the “commons” as an horizon for action, are the hallmark of contemporary movements.

As this summary highlights, the different contributors have several takes on the issue of collective identity and its manifestations. Some see identity as a central object of concern, and see social media as platforms in which new identities are forged and channeled, while others take a more problematic view, pointing to the multiple and fragmented nature of collective identities as they develop on these digital platforms. The articles demonstrate that social media have become the key site where protest identities, are created, channeled and contested. Thus, they urge us to continue exploring the transformation of protest identity in a digital era, overcoming the current fixation with strategic and instrumental approaches.

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